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NOTES ON THE *NORNAGESTS ÞÁTTIR*

Like the other *þáttir*, or episodes, of the *Ólafssagas* the *Nornagests þáttir* serves in a way to shed lustre on the king who attracts to his Christian sphere, and incorporates into his *hírð*, all the famous heroes of his own time, aye those of remotest antiquity as well;—such as Gest (called Nornagest) who, another Wandering Jew, has seen and has fought under, the great hero-kings of the fornöld and the earliest historic times, under Sigurd fáfnisbani and the Gjukungs, the Loðbróks sons, Eric Uppsalaking, Harold Wartooth, and Harold Hairfair; and finally resorts to the court of Ólaf Tryggvason, attracted by that king's fame.

As Sophus Bugge had demonstrated,¹ the framework of this *þáttir* is a Meleager motif. At Gest's birth three *völur* or prophetesses (her also called Norns) had been called in to lay the gifts of fortune into his cradle. Just as in the widely spread Dornröschen story² two of them foretell his coming good fortune; but the third is incensed³ and dooms him to live only so long as the candle lasts which is lit by his side; whereupon one of the older *völur* quickly extinguishes it and hands it to his mother with the warning never to light it till his dying day. After having told Ólaf Tryggvason his story he is baptized.⁴ Then, with Nornagest's consent, the fatal candle is lit and he dies.

¹ Helgedigtene, pp. 99 ff.

² For a list of the various versions see Bolte und Polivka, *Anmerkungen zu den Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm*. I, 439.

³ *Hin yngsta nornin þóttist oflitils metin af hinum tveim, er þeir spurðu hana eigi eptir; var þá ok mikil ribbalda sveit, er henni hratt or sinu sæti, ok feldu til jarðar.*—Concerning the *sveit*, the *sæti*, and the methods in general, of the *völur*, cf. Gering, *Über Weissagung und Zauber im nordischen Altertum*, 1902, and Finnur Jónsson, in *Þrjár riðgjörðir tileinkaðar P. Melsted*, 1892, p. 8 ff. The large and sometimes unruly following of the *völur* seems to have been necessary to form the concentric circles for the effective singing of the magic *varðlökur*; cf. the excellent article of Magnus Olsen, *Maal og Minne* 1916, pp. 1 ff.

⁴ *Konungur mælti: "Hví fórtu nú hingat til vár?" Gestr svarar: "Þessu sveif mér i hug, ællaða ek mik nokkut auðnubragð af yðr hljóta mundu, þvíat þér eruð mjök lofaðir af góðum mönnum ok vítrum. Konungur segir: "Viltu nú taka hér skírn?" Gestr svarar: þat vil ek nú gera eptir yðru ráði."* I follow Bugge's text, in *Norræne Skrifter af Sagnhistorisk Indhold*, 1864, which is based on Cod. Arn.-Magn. 62 fol. (S). Other editions: Fas. 1, 310; Fornm. s. X, 422; Ftb. 1, 346; in Wilken, *Die prosaische Edda*, 235.

One night the pious king Ólaf Tryggvason was in bed, wakeful and praying, while all other men were asleep in his lodgings. Then it seemed to the king as if an elf or spirit (*einn alfr eða andi*) entered into the house though the doors were locked. He went before every man's couch and finally stopped where lay a man near the door. Then he said: Wondrously strong locks are here on an empty house, and the king is not as wise as others deem when they claim him to be the wisest of men, seeing that he lies asleep now. Then the elf vanished through the closed door.

The þáttr, or rather the monkish scribe, has the following naive explanation of this apparition: But the elf said this about the lock because Gest had signed himself with the cross, in the evening, like other men, but was in reality a heathen. However, it was of the most common occurrence that men were merely prime-signed; see below.

Evidently the spirit observed by Ólaf was the fylgja or attendant spirit of Gest who—as we learn directly—had entered the house unbeknown to the king.

Early the next morning the king sends his page to find out who had come. The arrival of an unknown man is announced to him who says his name is Gest. This man was of courteous manners and appearance, of larger size than men usually, and somewhat advanced in years. When asked about his origin he answers: “Þórðr was the name of my father, and he was called Þinghusbíttr, of Danish stock. He dwelled on that estate in Denmark which is called Groeningr.”

Gest proves to be a master in story telling, in playing on the harp and in reciting lays, and he is wise in all manner of things: so much so that the king's followers urge him to keep on with his tales and the king himself, though with some misgivings, delights in listening to his heathenish accounts of the kings of yore.

Who is this Gest? Or, rather, with whose attributes has the author of the story fitted him out?

His name immediately suggests relationship with that *Gestum-blindi*⁵ who, in the *Hervararsaga*, impersonates the *bondi* of the same name who is bidden to measure himself in riddles with wise king Heiðrek and who turns out to be Odin himself. The story-

⁵ Cf. the Odin names *Helblindi*, *Herblindi* (Grimnism. 47) and *Gunnblindi*, *Skáldsk. Odinsheiti*.

teller had not far to go to lend his figure color, once he had chosen the frame work of his story. Not only Meleager and the Wandering Jew but Odin also was the wanderer (*Gangleri*, *Vafuðr*, *Vegtamr*) and has been the companion of the heroes of old.

Gest calls himself the son of Þórðr, whose epithet is þing (hus)-bitr,⁶ i. e., one who bites (or arouses strife) in the þing (hus) or assembly hall. In the *Grimnismál* 49 Odin mentions as one of his many names *Þrór*⁷ *þingum at*, i. e., “*Þrór* in the assemblies.” Now the name *Þrór* (here changed, designedly, perhaps, to *Þórðr*) is explained as the “causer of strife.” This epithet exactly suits the god of battle who is ever busy inciting strife among princes. Cf. e. g., *Helgakviða Hundingslana*, ii, 34:

*Einn veldr Óðinn
öllo bǫli,
þvat med sífungum
sacrúnar bar.*

“Odin alone is the causer of all evil, because he with hate-runes incited the kinsmen”; and *Hárbarðsljóð*

*Var ek a Vallandi
og vigom fylgðak,
attak jǫfrom
en aldri sættak.*

“In Valland I was, attended battles, I egged on the princes but never reconciled them.”

Still further, Gest says that his father was of Danish stock and dwelled on that estate which is called Grœningr. But “green” is the recurring attribute of the earth, as the home of men. Thus in the *Alvissmál* the earth is called *igrøn* ‘the very green’— in contrast with the giants’ world of naked rock and ice. In the *Rígsþula* Heimdall is said to walk *grønar brautir*⁸ ‘green ways,’ i. e., ‘the earth.’ We remember that Heimdall is a god of the tribe of the Vanir and that in the *Alvissmál* the kenning of the Vanir for earth is *vega*, ‘ways.’ Also, according to *Hárbarðsljóð*, 16, *Algrøn* is the name of the island on which Hárbarð-Odin, in company with Fjölvar, spends five years in battles and adventures; that is, on the green earth where, in the words of the *Völuspá*

⁶ Ftb. version has þingbitr. Cf. Wilken, voc. *Pros. Edda*, sub Þórðr.

⁷ Also the name of a dwarf in the *dvergahæiti* of the *Völuspá*.

⁸ The same phrase occurs, to be sure, in the *Fáfnismál*, st. 41.

grund vas gróin
grónum lauki,

‘the ground was grown with green herbs.’

As to Þórðr being said to be of Danish stock it is to be kept in mind that the Icelanders, both in folklore and learned cosmogonies, maintained that the cult of Odin was introduced from the South and still had its main seat there.

Let me emphasize that I am not claiming Gest to be Odin himself,⁹ but that the author of the þátttr, in casting about for attributes to give the figure of the wanderer some fullness, simply borrowed the stereotype features of the ancient godhead.

Nowhere does Gest take an active part in the events narrated by him. Hence we are justified in holding him to have been invented ad hoc as a bearer of the Meleager motif and thus a convenient peg whereon to hang all manner of mythic-heroic legends and fragments of Eddic poetry which clung in the author’s mind.

No sooner did Christianity become established in Scandinavia but the ancient divinities were debased into evil spirits, more or less closely allied to the Christian devil. Þórr may be said to have escaped this process, his good-natured impetuosity and red beard amalgamating with the historic features of king Ólaf the Saint. Odin, on the other hand, representing the secret arts and the magic lore of the heathens is frequently found reappearing as an evil spirit, tempting men to relapse into *inn forna sið*.

As is natural, such stories attached themselves more particularly to Ólaf the Saint, for political reasons. In fact, we may safely assert that the genre began with his saga and spread only afterwards to the other Christian kings of Norway.

In the so-called historic *Ólafssaga helga*¹⁰ we find a cluster dealing with encounters of Ólaf with supernatural personages. Two of these contain the essential elements of the framework of the Nornagests þátttr, and therefore possibly suggested its idea. The similarities will be evident.

The first þátttr tells of a man whom the king rather reluctantly accepts into his company. This man, who also calls himself Gest, is described as unfriendly and overbearing. He wears his hood pulled down over his eyes so that one could not make out his face.

⁹ As do e.g., Mogk, *Germanische Mythologie*, p. 115, Wilken, *Sn. Edda*, Voc. sub Nornagest. Golther, *Handbuch d. germ. Myth.* p. 341.

¹⁰ Ftb. II, §§ 106, 107.

He was bearded. The king forbids his men to have much to do with the stranger; but in the evening, when retiring, he asks Gest to come to his bedside for entertainment. And then the man proves to be both full of lore and ready of speech.¹¹ He asks Ólaf who of the kings of old he would like to be if he had the choice. The king suspects a ruse but finally—while insisting on remaining a Christian—consents to say that Hrólf kraki would be his choice. Gest is displeased thereat and asks why he does not prefer to be like that king who was victorious in all battles and likewise so handsome and athletic that his like was not in the North, and besides had the gift to make his chieftains as victorious as himself—one to whom verse-making was as easy as speaking to other men. Thereupon the king sat up in bed and, seizing his breviary, was about to throw it at Gest with the words: “least of all would I be evil Odin,” when the tempter sinks into the ground.

In the third þáttir the following is told: One day when the king was in Sarpsborg a certain Toki Tokason approached him, asking to be accepted into the *hirð* for a while. The king grants his prayer and Toki (very much like Nornagest) turns out to be well-mannered and popular. The king enjoyed his conversation because of his wise answers and the fulness of his lore. Toki was an old man but it was evident that he had formerly been of unusual strength and beauty. One day the king asked him how old he was. Toki said he hardly knew himself. He was certain only of having been foretold that he was to live the length of two men’s lives,¹² and that his end was near now. Then he relates the trials of strength he had with the followers of Hrólf kraki and King Hálf—which, to be sure, would have required a more generous allowance of life than here allotted to the contemporary of Ólaf the Saint! The king asks him whether he is a Christian, Toki says that he is ‘prime-signed,’ as he had to deal both with heathens and Christians, and that he had finally repaired to the pious king’s court in order to be baptized there. This is done and he dies (like Nornagest) *í hvítaröðum*—in the white weeds of the newly baptized.

We have learned to doubt the autochthonous origin of the more composite folklore motifs. The Meleager motif employed in the

¹¹ So far, the story is paralleled by the one of Odin’s visit with Ólaf Trygvason, *Hskgl.*, ch. 64.

¹² Cf. the supernatural span of life granted to Qrvar-Odd (300 years) and to Starkad (three men’s lives) *Qrvaroddss.*, ch. II, Saxo, book XVI.

Nornagest þáttur very probably was not indigenuous. It was used quite frequently in Mediæval French literature, the oldest instances being found in the *Amadis* (13th century) and *Ogier le Danois* (14th century). To this may be added another, if but trifling, evidence of Southern influence.

Of his service under the sons of Lodbrók Gest tells the following story:¹³ I was a short while with the Lodbróksons when they were hurrying south of Mundifjall and intended to proceed on Rome. One day a pilgrim came to king Bjorn Ironside. He said his name was *Sones* and that he came from Rome. The king asked him how long the journey was thither. *Sones* shows him his iron shoes, how they are worn down from the length of the journey. Whereupon the Lodbróksons decide that the way to Rome is too long and desist from an attack on it.

Now as to the name of the pilgrim Finnur Jónsson holds¹⁴ that it arose through a verbal misunderstanding of the text though he fails to explain exactly how.—S. Bugge remarks¹⁵ that both name and story have a foreign aspect and suggests that it may be of Latin or Romance origin.

In the *Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed* for 1907, p. 1 ff., Kristian Nyrop has an article entitled "Norske Forhold i det 13de aarhundrede efter en samtidig fransk kilde." In it he discusses the descriptions of Norwegian nature and manners contained in the 13th century French epic of *Sone de Nansai* and comes to the conclusion that "there is considerable probability that the trouvère who depicted the hero *Sone's* sojourn in Norway had himself visited that country. . . . In itself there is nothing surprising in a Frenchman having visited Scandinavia in the 13th century when one remembers that, during Hákon Hákonson's time there was frequent literary intercourse between France and Norway." It is the period when scores of French epics were translated into Norwegian and courtiers and merchants were advised (as in the *Speculum Regale*) to learn especially Latin and French: *latinu ok völsku, þótt þær tungur ganga víðast*.

If the poet of the French poem had visited Norway it is perhaps not too bold to assume that he made the acquaintance of some

¹³ Practically the same story is told in the *Ragnarssaga lodbrókar*, chap. xiii, but (as in the Ftb. version of the N.) the name *Sones* is lacking.

¹⁴ *Litt. hist.* p. 847: navnet. . . beror vistnok kun på en fejlæsnings.

¹⁵ In his "Anmærkninger," ed. p. 80.

clerics—it is likely that he visited some cloister—and who knows but the one who inserted this name into this version of the story may have had the whim to attach the name of the heroic knight to the pilgrim who discourages the sons of Lodbrók from approaching Rome.

Examining the contents of the epic in the detailed resumé of Langlois in his *La Société Française dans la Treizieme siècle* I find that Sone began his career as an errant knight who visits the north, especially Ireland, Scotland, and Norway. As a reward for his services against the Irish he is given the hand of the Norwegian princess Odée, inherits the throne of Norway, is called by the pope to defend Rome, and finally becomes emperor of Rome and defender of the Faith against the Saracens. Nowhere, to be sure, is he mentioned as a pilgrim, though there is a bare possibility of such an episode in the lacuna of some 2400 lines in the epic. Still, it was he who saved Rome from the Infidels.

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